

METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS
David J. Robertson, Executive Director

Testimony to the Committee on Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Tom Davis, Chairman

Good morning Chairman Davis and members of the Committee. I am David Robertson, executive director of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG). Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. As you know, COG is an organization of 19 member local governments committed to addressing mutual areas of concern in the region such as transportation, human services and public safety and the environment.

I believe today's hearing will help rebuild public confidence in the ability of government to respond to a wide range of hazards and refocus preparedness and response capabilities as the lessons of Hurricane Katrina unfold. I do not believe a critique at this time in any way minimizes the contributions of first responders, emergency planners and public officials since September 11 to strengthen preparedness and response efforts in the National Capital Region. But we can do more, and we can do better.

My testimony today will focus on both regional achievement and COG's plan to support area local governments and other partners moving forward.

On many levels, we are better prepared, but with more to do.

Personal preparedness is growing in our homes, schools and places of business. Partnerships --- such as those forged by COG --- have brought new ideas and resources to the emergency planning table, formerly the province of only government officials. Business and non-profit involvement has made for better plans and an enhanced response capacity. The region has invested in first responder equipment, new communications technologies, and stepped up training and exercises.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has meant that public officials and our partners need to go back to the drawing board, as the title of this hearing suggests. Katrina does not mean we must abandon the good work to date, but to now evaluate that work against new scenarios and higher standards of preparedness and response.

To that end, yesterday the COG Board of Directors, at the initial request of Montgomery County Executive Doug Duncan and other top elected officials, agreed to “re-tool the extensive emergency planning we have done over the past several years in light of the response to Katrina.”

This is not COG’s first time to step up to an important regional challenge. Just days after the September 11 terrorist attacks, COG put in place a broad, comprehensive regional emergency planning process that provided the framework for much of the emergency preparedness and response efforts that followed.

Products included a first-of-its-kind Regional Emergency Coordination Plan and the Regional Incident Communications and Coordination System --- also known as the RICCS ---which uses state-of-the-art teleconferencing, e-mailing, and paging systems to ensure seamless communication among key officials.

The RICCS represented a major step forward in the region’s ability to communicate in the event of an emergency. The first 24/7 RICCS Host Center was established in the District of Columbia’s Emergency

Management Agency, and we now have centers in Montgomery County, Fairfax County and the state emergency agency headquarters Reisterstown, Maryland and Richmond, Virginia.

Coupled with the Regional Emergency Coordination Plan and RICCS, the region held several exercises to test its use against a range of natural and man-made hazard scenarios. All of this was done under the guidance of a public-private panel that would come to be known at the National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council and in partnership with an enhanced state commitment to regional collaboration and the new Office of National Capital Region Coordination.

How have our plans worked? In some cases, such as with Hurricane Isabel, our planning and response efforts largely met the test. Decision-making, asset deployment and emergency response were coordinated across the region. In other instances, such as the infamous “tractor-man” incident coordination and transportation were greater challenges.

Equipment, surveillance and improved communication were top priorities for use of the early rounds of Urban Area Security Initiative funding. These

funds strengthened the capacity of area governments, and in some cases the private sector to respond to a range of natural and man-made disasters. For example, the region's health officials developed an electronic surveillance system to more quickly track the reporting of diseases and symptoms of serious illnesses. The system includes a network to gather data on emergency room visits, over the counter drug sales and clinician outpatient visits.

The region's public information officers developed a virtual Joint Information Center to facilitate communication between their offices during an emergency. The JIC is an Internet portal that allows public information officers to collaborate with each other and elected officials during emergencies to develop messages and coordinate interaction with the news media.

Hundreds of local and state officials and planners participated in a Command Post Exercise in 2004 that used vivid emergency scenarios to test the region's response.

Police and fire officials, using new federal grants for equipment purchases, carefully planned and then purchased a cache of 800 megahertz radios to allow them to communicate on a uniform system. They also purchased new personal protective equipment and additional sets of gear for first responders. We have spent more than \$26 million to outfit first responders in the area's 9 major jurisdictions and the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority with high-tech gear for emergencies.

Finally, last week the National Capital Region launched a major Citizen Preparedness Campaign to encourage citizens to develop emergency plans for their homes and offices. The campaign's media advertising and outreach efforts at fairs and events around the region began last week.

Past achievements are not enough. COG has been asked to marshal the energy of area officials and other stakeholders to re-evaluate plans to incorporate initial Hurricane Katrina lessons learned. We expect to include in this work a better understanding of how mutual aid, state and federal resources are requested and provided during a regional emergency and advance the development of a coordinated public information system that would provide clear, real-time information on emergency response actions to

residents, businesses and visitors to our region. We also need to address the preparedness and response requirements of special needs populations, including low income and transit-dependent families. This and other work will take place in an environment that is often skeptical of past achievements and questions the impact of the best efforts of government.

Thank you for the opportunity to share a brief summary of achievements and highlight the challenges we now face and will overcome. The response to the September 11 terrorist attacks has re-defined the work of government and the work of COG. On behalf of the COG Board, we look forward to working with the Congress and this committee to ensure that our region is the best prepared in the nation, and in the event of a regional emergency, has the vision and capacity to protect our citizens.